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ABSTRACT

In a time when social studies education is considered non-essential and is forced to justify its existence, the importance of citizenship education cannot be ignored. Current economic trends have caused some schools to question the need for social studies, thereby offering fewer courses and limiting funding for materials and professional meetings. Part of the solution to this problem is to define the role of social studies and to offer national guidelines and standards for educators. It is also important that students become informed citizens, able to deal with the "new realities of politics" by exercising their own judgments in dealing with the complexities of government. Marketable skills are important in today's society. By providing all citizens with an education, rather than merely information, social studies is a contributing factor to the development of these skills. (BY)

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SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE EIGHTIES: OLD PROBLEMS, CURRENT TRENDS, NEW RESPONSES

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SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE EIGHTIES: OLD PROBLEMS,

CURRENT TRENDS, NEW RESPONSES

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NASSP
Dallas, Texas
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Let me begin my remarks by saying that speaking before you today is a notable event for me. Notable because it is my first occasion to speak before a gathering of school principals. And notable because it is my first time, ever, to set foot in the great state of Texas!

I am honored to have been invited to speak to your convention, and am pleased that you are interested in hearing the perspective of someone who speaks on behalf of social studies teachers. I, in turn, look forward to hearing from you in the discussion to follow, the perspectives you bring on the common problems shared by teacher and principal alike.

It is absolutely necessary that professionals in all segments of the education field encourage and invite dialogue with others both within and without the education business. Principals must join with teachers--their colleagues and, some might say, co-conspirators --in addressing the problems of declining enrollments, quality of courses, cutbacks, curriculum and the like. Teachers must resist the tendency to talk only to one another. Worse yet, English teachers talking only to English teachers, Math to Math, and Social Studies to Social Studies. If the arena of dialogue is so limited--if we talk only among ourselves, we tend to hear things we already know and agree with, and lose the challenge of the outside view. Moving beyond your own little circle <u>is</u> a challenge, and it is not always an easy one--one has to explain and defend those "eternal verities" you always took for granted. This can be both frustrating and scary.

I have experienced much of this this past year in my move to Washington, DC to assume the directorship of the National Council for the Social Studies. Moving from 16 years in the delightful, comfortable isolation of the Pacific Northwest I learned

quickly indeed how different is the "fast track" of Washington politics! Moving also from the warm cocoon of a university campus (admittedly much warmer in past years before the devastating impact of program and tenure cuts) to the "real world" of marketing, membership promotion, business and finances"; (running an association of educators is more like running a business enterprise than it is communing with educators in a Socratic dialogue--just the same way running a school makes the principal more of a "C.E.O." than anything else!). I have found myself again and again, defending values and arguing about assumptions I had not questioned in years. Having just survived--barely--as a committed, anti-football advocate in the "Land of the Washington Redskins," you can see that entering the den of school principals, as the advocate of the social studies teacher, seems easy by comparison!

What I propose to do, in the time allotted to me, is to outline briefly some of the problems plaguing the field of social studies. Many of these are not new at all, but are simply resurfacing in new garb in response to the political and economic climate of the times. These center on two areas: (1) definitions as to what the social studies are; and (2) questions as to why we need these subjects, whatever they are called, in the schools anyway, i.e., the questions raised by the "back to basics" movement. I will also summarize, again briefly, the national trends which constitute the background in which social studies teaching is going on: cut-backs, lay-offs, fewer electives, decreased support for teachers. Of course, as school principals, most of you are familiar with both these problems and trends.

I shall, therefore, focus most of my remarks on the response we--all of us in education, from principal to classroom teacher to universitymethods professor--ought to be providing. Sadly, this response seems often to be coming more articulately and more cogently from those outside the education community, than from those within it.

It is demoralizing to be in a profession, such as teaching, which has suffered a lost of esteem in the eyes of the wider community. It is even more demoralizing to be in social studies teaching and to be forced, continually, to justify your existence as something more than an "add-on" or tangent to what conventional wisdom holds as <u>really</u> important in the curriculum: science, math, and, maybe, reading. Not unnaturally, the response all too often is to hunker down, to become defensive, and to try to protect one's turf.

That is not enough. Granted, many who attack the social studies today do so from an ideological point of view which condemns the inclusion, over the past years, of "new " viewpoints: minorities, women, multi-cultural and global perspectives, interdisciplinary insights from the social sciences. Nonetheless, this criticism, even if sometimes for the wrong reasons, should motivate us to engage in honest and health <u>self</u>-criticism of what it is we are doing, and failing to do.

<u>Problems</u>

From the beginning, those involved in all the different levels of social studies education have been wrestling with questions of self-identity and definition. Trained as undergraduates in the various social sciences or History, future teachers find themselves teaching courses ranging from Geography to Civics to History and Economics. The professional literature for years has struggled with questions of demarcation of the field: how <u>does</u> one define the social studies? Is it simply the agglomeration of all the disparate courses of History and Social Sciences on a level suitable for K-12 instruction, or is it something over and beyond the sum of the parts? It is not a coincidence that the organization which I head, the National Council for the Social Studies, lists "advocacy of the social studies" as one of its major goals. If the discipline boundaries were clear, one would not need to advocate for them.

The continual effort to search for the parameters of the social studies is useful and healthy for the profession. More importantly, it carries a new urgency as teachers and school systems scrutinize ever more closely the social studies curriculum. For years we have heard the plea on the part of educators all over the country for some set of national guidelines and standards which would serve to assist curriculum planners and school systems in designing integrated social studies courses of study. The National Council for the Social Studies has developed a widely used set of guidelines, "The Essentials of the Social Studies," which set forth in broad terms the knowledge areas, democratic beliefs, thinking and participation skills, and civic action which ought to be the bedrock of the social studies. NCSS has also published curriculum guidelines which have proved helpful to many. But the widely demanded "scope and sequence" guidelines, at least at a national level, do not yet exist.

I am pleased to report to you, however, that this year the National Council has established a "blue-ribbon" panel of distinguished social studies educators to develop a model social studies scope and sequence set of guidelines. Clearly, these guidelines should go far in helping to address the questions of what constitutes a "common core" of shared social studies throughout the elementary and secondary years, as well as providing some guidance to the difficult questions of how to select content at the different grade levels. To the degree that the criteria for choice of this topic or elimination of that can be articulated and accepted by teachers, administrators, and the general public, the second problem alluded to earlier--why have the social studies in the schools anyway--will be taken care of. But this issue is the basic one, and I will return to it.

Trends

The current economic and educational climate has significant ramifications for social studies teachers--the trends are clear and unmistakable:

- Social studies requirements and offerings are eroding steadily. The breadth of offerings is being curtailed, fewer electives and fewer grade levels.

In a number of states there are serious questions about social studies in the elementary grades, particularly in the primary years. In other states, even at the secondary levels, state-wide requirements have narrowed to include only U. S. History and American Government.

• 1982 was a year which saw widespread "rifs" of social studies teachers; in areas which are particularly hard-hit by the recession, such as the Midwest and the Northwest, teachers with 10-15 years seniority have lost jobs. Those who survive the cut are often reassigned to subjects where shortages exist, with devastating morale effects on all concerned.

• Funding cutbacks affect materials available. Teachers must rely increasingly on the course textbook, as funds no longer exist for the paperbacks, current handouts, audiovisual aids, or other supplementary materials so vital to remain current in the social studies. And textbooks themselves must last longer. Can you imagine how incredibly out of date a U S government or history textbook is, written a mere ten years ago! Yet this may be recent compared to most texts commonly in use in the average classroom.

• Funds for in-service workshops and attendance at professional meetings have also been severely curtailed. Teachers, suffering economic pressures created by the recession, find they must dip into their own pockets if they want this kind of professional advancement. Not surprisingly, apathy and malaise are characteristic of many as a result.

• Paradoxically, community interest in the schools is very high. Much of the interest, however, seems to bypass the field of the social studies. High unemployment rates make parents increasingly sensitive to how marketable their children's skills will be in today's economy. The pressures are for the practical and the vocational--social studies is on the defensive to prove its usefulness and relevancy.

The Response

So much for some of the problems and the trends which face us today. How can we look creatively and with some imagination at our responses? I would urge

that we recognize that the realities of politics for the great majority of adults, let alone young people today are: most citizens do not relate to their government, nor to those who govern; relatively few understand the complexities of the processe of policy formulation. Our complex modern society is vastly different from anything imagined by the Greeks, or by Jefferson or Madison; yet most of our models of citizenship education are built on their views of the world.

Let us take one example: the dominance of special interest groups within contemporary society in a manner and way unimagined by Madison in his famous Federalist 10. Madison saw the conflict and juxtaposition of factions as both inevitable and basically healthy, a sign of vitality in a pluralist society. He had no way of foreseeing the vast increase in number and variety of private groups, in the new techniques, such as direct mailing houses and slick public relations campaigns, which succeed in building nationwide constituencies in a matter of weeks. Lobbying skills and the ability to "work the media" enable organized groups today to bring pressures to bear far outweighing their numbers. In contrast to the persistent myth, still carried forward in civics classes, that government and the private sector are two separate entities, the interest groups have penetrated government in all its branches. It is simply a fact of life in 1980s politics that politicians use the interest groups and are used by them. Politics is simply too expensive to leave to the politicians. As John Gardner explains, "only old-fashioned people give or take bribes any more." More effective (and just a bit more subtle) is the campaign contribution. And, to quote Gardner once more, "as in all commerce, those with the most money tend to prevail. Heaven help the group with a just cause and an empty purse."

What does this mean for social studies? Simply that we must revise our texts, our courses, and, indeed, our own perspectives (themselves created from earlier years), and expose our students to the new realities of politics. We are foolish to condemn or deplore. Politics is what it is today, and we need to do a better

job training our students to confront these new complexities. If the current curriculum is not succeeding in training democratic citizens able to exercise their own judgments in the management of society, then we must challenge the curriculum to do so. If we do not, others will do it for us. And they are already.

One reason our schools are under scrutiny, and the social studies under particular and harsh criticism, is that over the past three or four decades, society has tended to assign more and more of its training tasks to the schools. Citizenship education goes on everywhere: television is preeminent; clubs and associations affect the ideas of many; business and industry are essentially involved in education. Schools, and their social studies curricula, have a special role: to develop commitment to the values of our American political tradition. This is difficult enough to do, but it is not enough--we must do more.

The goals of citizen education are not just academic, but are social. As Robert Kingston, former president of the College Board and deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, says, we need to enhance the ability of the average citizen to deal effectively with the host of public issues by which their lives are defined.

Those who are in the business of education often confuse education with information. We think if we provide more of the latter we have done more of the former. But due to the skills of the new technologies and the ubiquitousness of modern communication, our problem is not too little information, but too much. As Kingston puts it, "by and large the American public is hard put to stay afloat in a sea of information; it remains UNINFORMED," in the sense of Jefferson's hallowed model of an "informed citizenry." How well do our social studies classes help students to distinguish between media stars and true leadership? significant happenings compared to media-created news? real understanding as against technical expertise? If we cannot help to do this, we should not be surprised that when

these young people become adults they will possess little genuine understanding of government actions, much less the information and judgment on the basis of which to judge these actions.

It is unfair to expect the schools by themselves to solve the problems of education. And, to go one step further, it is unfair within the schools to leave solely to the social studies the tasks of citizenship education. The concepts of democratic values, justice, intelligent problem-solving and decision-making certainly must be interdisciplinary and permeate the rest of the curriculum, if they are to mean anything at all.

No single institution can accomplish the immense task of building civic literacy in the citizenry. Leadership from all spheres of life--business, labor, government, religion, the voluntary sector, and the media--are concerned, as are those of us in education, about improving the civic competence of those within our society. And certainly we are talking about far, far more than voting every four years at election time--although that easy and tiny evidence of citizen participation in the political process itself is dismayingly low.

In conclusion, the response we provide to those who charge that what we do in our schools and classrooms in the domain of Citizenship Education is not basic ought to be: yes, you are right. We do not do enough. And you must help us. You--whether school principal, supervisor, parent, business leader--you must share responsibility with us, the social studies teacher, for the immense task of educating and reeducating our citizens in the values, traditions, and policy-making processes of our society. Facility in the new languages of our computer society--"computer literacy" --ability to deal with complex scientific and mathematics involved in the constantly changing technologies--of what use are these without the central and basic ability to emulate the Jeffersonian notion of the informed citizen? We are mutually dependent upon one another, both within the various spheres of our own society, and between and among our increasingly interdependent world. The task of surviving, coping with, directing and judging the actions of

government is the basic one today.

Perhaps part of the reason why so many view social studies as not "basic" today is that we have failed to carry out our traditional and long-standing mission, citizenship education, as well as we should. We must go beyond the verities and platitudes born of another era, and do a far better job of creating civic literacy in today's young people, so they will be better able to understand and function intelligently within the realities of today's America.

If the public schools are to retain credibility as central purveyors of education, and not lose out to all the other institutions in the business of education, we must be a lot clearer about what our unique role is. This is not an easy task and it involves the full support and cooperative relationship between teacher, supervisor, principal and all the others within the school arena. We all bear a degree of responsibility for what kinds of citizens we are creating. It is a task of enormous magnitude--but it is exciting and exhilarating, if each of us does what he or she can do to further the effort. Helping to create future generations who are better prepared than we were to deal with the national and international problems of civic life? What can be more basic and more of a challenge than that?